[Robert Smith]

26084 [Couch?] - Life History - [Jax?] - Robert Smith Lillian [Steadman?]

David Smith

[226?] [?] Street

Jacksonville, Florida

December 22, [1938?]

Lillain [Steadman?]

ROBERT? SMITH

The Smiths live in a small four-room cottage that is typical of the houses inhabited by industrial workers in the area surrounding the Jacksonville railway shop yards. I wade through the loose ankle-deep grey sand, and wait at the front door for an invitation to enter. A straggly, mange-eaten little dog is tied to the banister and wags his tail vigorously.

Bobbie, about nine years old, answers my rap on the door. He is ragged, dirty, cheerful. “Come in and have a seat,” he says. “I'll call mama. —Mama! Somebody to see you, [A?] lady.” Fla.

I sit in the only seat available, a broken and soiled davenport. The floor is rough and bare, but shows evidence of frequent and recent scrubbing. A sewing machine, old bureau and a tin hot-blast heater comprise the furnishings of the room. c. 4—12/21/40

His mother, apparently quite shy, enters slowly. She is neatly dressed in a blue uniform. I tell her that I understand she and her family have recently come from the strawberry-

growing section of the State, and that I would like to have her tell me something of her life, as I believe it would be interesting.

“Yes,” she said. “We lived in [? Wauchula?] Florida sharecroppin a farm about 12 years. We couldn't make a livin cause the strawberries only lasts a short time and we didn't have enough land to make anything a-tall. We only had a three-acre farm. My old man woulda liked a bigger farm about 14 acres—maybe we coulda made [?] 2 then, Smitty—Smitty's my old man—he thought maybe if we come to Jacksonville we could make a livin. We thought maybe he could git him a steady job here.

“You know we got five children to feed and it's kinda hard to git along on so little. My two oldest helps us out a lot; my boy Jim is 19 and he come up here to try and git a job too but couldn't so he's went back to [?]. He said he knowed he could pick strawberries if nothin else. My oldest girl Amelia—she's in there in the kitchen, she helps me a lot—is 17 and in the ninth grade at school. She's the ony one of my children that likes school. The others don't care a thing a-tall about gittin a education it looks like, but Amelia she will go even if she don't have nothin to wear.

“Smitty has gone to the pulp paper mill to see if he can git on out there. The city councilman of this ward has been a-speaking for him; he seems to think a right smart of Smitty. I sure do hop he gits on out there so we won't have to go back to strawberry pickin. It sure is a shame strawberries grow so low to the ground. It's mighty hard on me cause I can't stoop over so low like the others do—I have to crawl along on my hands and knees.

“We didn't live continuous on the strawberry farm. Two or three times durin the season we went to Hamilton County, Georgia, and worked a tobacco farm. There's good money in that, but it don't last very long and it's awful hard work. Me, Smitty, Jim, and Amelia all worked. They paid us by the day; we each made a dollar and a half a day.

“I like the tobacco farmin better than the berry I believe, but I sure don't like [succorin?] the plants. —[Succorin?] is pulling off the little vines that grow up on the tobacco plants.

You have to reach down and pull 3 up the vines by the roots. [Succorin?] is terrible—reglar nigger-man work.”

A beautifully blonde, but [tousled?] and dirty little girl entered the room. She placed her head in her mother's lap and began coughing and sniffling. Her cheeks were flushed with fever.

“Betty's got the croup,” her mother said. “Bill used to have it too—all the time worse than this—but I just kept on givin him kerosene till I finally cured him. He is well and hearty now, and can play out. You know kids don't never keep their coats on, but it don't hurt Bill no more a bit in the world. —Betty, you run tell Bill to come in here. You talk about a youngun hatin to go to school, well, Bill hates to go worsen all the rest of em.”

She arose and went to the kitchen, after asking to be excused to supervise the meal which Amelia was preparing. She continued to talk to me from the kitchen.

“We don't never eat till Smitty comes in. [We?] try to keep it hot for him. Looks like he orta be comin in purty soon now. The dinner is about ready, too. Amelia always helps me keep house and cook—I guess she's kinda bashful to meet strangers, she won't come out to set with you. I guess you can smell this bacon and sweet-potatoes. We cook biscuits too all the time; Smitty won't eat that store-an bread. He says it's not good for you.”

She re-enters the room, holding her twelve year old son Bill by the hand. Bill does seem to be in robust health. “Bill, you're the dirtiest boy I ever seen. Looks like you would wash your face and hands sometime without me a-havin to always tell you to. I wanted the lady to see what 4 a big fine boy you are and you are so dirty and nasty that I'm ashamed of you. —He's been a-helpin me put out the wash today. I always git him to keep the fire to the pot when I wash so maybe that's why he's so black and dirty now.”

Bill doesn't seem to share his mother's embarrassment. “Would you like to see my dog?” he asks. “I found him this mornin and I've tied him up so he can't git away. I don't know who he belongs to but I'm gonna keep him myself.”

He goes to the porch to bring in the dog.

“Mama! Her comes daddy!” he shouts.

She and the children gather about him.

“Did you git the job daddy? Did you git the job daddy?”

“Yes,” he smiles, “daddy got a job and he had to do right back to work.” He is shorter than his wife, and wears horn-rimmed glasses.

His wife explains that I want “some information about our life so as I could write a story about it.”

“I always did want to write a story of my life just for my own satisfaction,” he says. “But you can git most all of it from my wife this time as I am a-goin to have to go purty soon to my new job out at the pulp paper mill. I thought I wasn't doin to make it—I had to stand the doctor's examination and he was fixin to not pass me on account of my eyes. He wouldn't have passed ifen my friend the city councilman, Mr. Sweet hadn't phoned him and that made everthing all right. It sure is mighty good to have a friend like that to stick up for you!

“When I got out to the mill I met a man who was a-fussin about quittin and drawin his pay and [sich?] like. He said, ‘Come with me and 5 I'll ask em to let you have my job if you want it. They always say they are goin to raiseyou but they never do. I been here a month and I started on 30 cents a hour and I'm still gittin 30 cents a hour.” I went inside the office and a man said, ‘say Buddy, is your name Smith?’

“I told him sure, and he told me ‘You go on in the other office and I'll make arrangements for the doctor to examine you. Councilman Sweet called up about you.’

“I want on in the other office. Never did see the feller what wanted to give me his job anymore—seems like some people don't know when to be satisfied. I was afraid the doctor was not a-goin to pass me, my eyes is so bad. But I told him I could do anything so long as the work is not too close. He passed me and I got a ratin too—the ratin gives me 35 cents instead of 30 cents and hour. I'm goin to run the elevator. I guess Sweet callin em up go me the job and ratin all right.

“I'm mighty glad to git this job. I sure don't want to go back to croppin berries. That's what I'd a had to do ifen I hadn't got this job—unless I got on the WPA. I never yet got nothin from the WPA and I hope it won't never be so as I have to. You can't never tell when them WPA jobs is goin to give out, neither.

“I'm a good farmer and do right well with the land I crop, but it's mighty hard to make even a livin to git along on when you're working for the other feller. He just won't give you enough to live on and you have to do all the work, too, and then not have enough to get along on. It's mighty hard on a feller with a family to [look?] out for. If it was just a man and his wife it would be different, but with kids it's pretty bad and the older kids gits the harder they are on you.

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“I would like for my kids to go on through school and be able to git along in the world without a-havin to work so hard like we always have had to. Maybe they could amount to [sumpun?] someday if they wold go on and git a education. They all hated to go so bad, cept Amelia, nd she likes to go [moren] any child I ever seen. Croppin berries and tobacco like we've been, the kids hafta help out durin season. I guess you've heered tell of the strawberry schools in [?]. Theschools closes down durin season.

Library of Congress

“Well, I wisht I had more time to talk to you. It's always pleasant to talk about yourself even if you don't have nothing much to say for yourself. I got to go and eat so as I can git ready to be on the job tonight. Won't you come on and eat with us? You are welcome to what we have; aint much but it will keep a-body from goin hungry. I always tells everbody that they are welcome to eat, cause we don't know when some of us may be hungry, and if you always treat everbody like you would like to be treated yourself, life might not be so bad after all.”

I thank him for the invitation, but ask to be allowed to wait for them to finish. While they eat in the kitchen, I observe the furnishings of the other rooms. In the back bedroom I see an old washstand which holds a number of bottles. There is a plain quart bottle with a long neck, and a Coca Cola bottle with a paper stopper in it; both bottles seem to contain home remedies. There is also a large bottle labelled “Watkin's Liniment,” half full of dark red liquid. In the opposite corner of the room there is a small iron bed, un-made, and a high-post bed with a feather mattress. The mattress is turned up to the window for sunning. The window shade is badly torn and hangs crookedly. Hanging on the wall by 7 the window are several dresses, which judging from the size and youthful lines, are probably Amelia's. They are of cheap cotton material, and obviously homemade.

Just inside the kitchen door I see and army cot, plied with freshly washed linen. In the back yard there are washlines full of clothes blowing in the wind. The back door is screenless. A rush of water is heard as the children go and come from the toilet between the two bedrooms.

In the front bedroom an old style wooden bed is covered with a homemade spread. A battered [steamer?] trunk supports photographs of the family. One pane of the window is broken out, and the hole is stuffed with newspaper and burlap sacking. [Laths?] are visible where chunks of plaster have fallen.

The house is cold and damp, and even though I wear a heavy coat, I am far from comfortable. All of the doors are open, and the only heat in from the stove in the kitchen.

As each of the family finishes eating they return to the living room. Smitty prepares to depart.

“I go on at four and git off at twelve,” he tells his wife. “Will you have me some hot supper ready when I come home?”

“Yes; I'll have you some hot supper all right, but I don't promise to be settin up a-waitin for you though at that time of night.”

He kisses each of the children and then goes into the kitchen to tell Amelia goodbye. Amelia's voice sounds soft and gentle. Smitty and [his?] wife walk to the door together, and embrace each other. She kisses [him on?] both cheeks and pats him on the back.

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“Take care of yourself, Honey,” she says.

“I'm goin to shave tomorrow so you won't be ashamed to kiss your old man.” After another embrace and patting her here and there, he asks me to come again sometime when he doesn't have to be leaving so soon.

She looks thoughtfully after him as he walks down the street, oblivious of my presence. As she turns her eyes [gleam?].

“I do hope he gits on well and can do good. I'm glad he's gonna be runnin the elevator—he aint so strong anymore even if he is ony [33?] years old. I'm older than him but I can do harder work than he can and hold out at it better too. I use to help him out when times get exter hard. I have worked in a laundry and a shrimp factory. The shrimp factory was where they can shrimp, but my job was cleanin em, takin the heads and hulls off. I didn't

like that job so much. It was awful to have to smell them all the time—made me sick to me stommick. You can git mighty tired smellin shrimp all the time. The juice was awful on your hands, too.

“The laundry wasn't so bad as the shrimp factory, but it's not a nice job neither. I use to do the sorting with some other girls before the clothes was washed and again when they was clean and ready to be ironed. When they were clean it wasn't so bad.

“The shrimp factory paid me 20 cents a hour and if I worked as hard as I could I could make nearly ten dollars a week. But I had to work steady eight hours without slowin up, or else the foreman who was watchin us would yell at us and dock part of our pay. The laundry didn't pay so good, but I didn't have to work so steady and hard like in the shrimp factory. The laundry paid me eight dollars a week for workin eight hours a day but I generly managed to get a little rest period while the clothes were in the washin machines.

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“Smitty don't like for me to work away from home. He thinks a woman should stay at home and do her work. That's why we would like to have a nice farm of our own; we could be together then.

“One time Smitty did go up to the WPA office and ask them for a job and they told him they would have to send somebody out to see us and then they would mail us a card so he would know when to come back up to the office to see them again. You see, there is so much red tape, and the work they would give him wouldn't pay nothin hardly. All the good money goes to the big shots, so Smitty says.

“The WPA aint never done nothin for any of our kinpeople, and Smitty's got a lot of em. He's got a daddy in Adel, Georgia, who is a-farmin and he has a young family—his second at that. His first set of [younguns?] all have children, and there he is with another young family of his own at his age. He's gonna be 75 next April, and his youngest baby is youngern ours, and ours is six or seven. I reckon he must believe in large families, or

maybe he don't believe in em but got em anyhow. I am the baby of [16?] children myself; don't know where they all are though.

“Our health is generally pretty good, I reckon; anyway I don't know whenever we did have a doctor to any of us. I always doctor them myself and manage to keep them pretty well. I didn't have no trainin at doctorin; it just comes [?] to me.

“We all use to go to church right reglar like, but we done got out of practice goin a long time ago. Smitty took up the Holiness Church one time and it looked for a while like he was a-goin to be one but we moved away from that neighborhood and so faraway from the church that we are clean out of practice now.

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“We had a car, a old piece of a car it was, but we could go in it to church and to picnics and [such?] like. [We?] aint got none a-tall now. [Seems?] like if you got one though you can always make a little money with it somehow. Ours was a sedan but Smitty cut it down and made a truck out of it so he could haul wood and help thataway. A feller can pick up little jobs here and there better if he's got a truck.

“[We?] always vote democratic-like. My folks before me was [democratics?] and Smitty's too. [?] Smitty always picks out his man from [?] party. I don't do no decidin bout the votin; I let Smitty do it cause I don't think women-fokes knows a great deal about that. He picks em out and I vote like he tells me to. You see, Smitty reads the papers and he use to listen to the radio—a radio is a-mighty fine thing to have round lection time, you can tell what's goin on so good. [?] had to turn ours back to the store cause we couldn't keep up the payments. They told us they would credit us with the account we paid on it on another radio when Smitty gits steady work.

“We don't believe any of them [new?] politic parties is much good. Smitty says that all they are good for is to make another [war?] if they are let alone. [Socialists?] and [?] are all the

time tryin to stir up trouble in big business, so Smitty thinks, and we don't want anything to do with anything but to make a honest livin and raise these kids up right.

“Mostly we have our pleasure right here t home with the younguns. [We?] are happy when we have some goods [?] and know where more is a-comin from. We don't care a thing in the world about them picture shows, but the kids are just crazy about them. [We?] think it's a waste of good hard-earned money, [but?] when we can afford the children the money we don't mind them goin.

“The thing that would make us happiest of all would be to have out 11 own little farm where we could grow our own vegetables and have a cow or two and a house that [would?] keep us warm in the cold weather and no rent man to pay. I think everbody ought to have a home [so?] when they git along in years they can feel free and satisfied-like. The children would feel a heap better too; maybe they would take a interest in our own house and try to keep it better [than?] they do a broken-down place like this.

“There's a good livin to be got out of a farm and you don't have the worries you do in a city. [But?] [sinst?] Smitty has got a job we won't have no complaints to make—just hope everthing turns out all right.

the children are all out, and the house is silent. Thoughts of the evening chores seem to irritate her, and she calls to Amelia, “Run out and bring in the clothes off the line and tell Billie and Bobby to git in the wood. And call Betty and tell her it's time to come [home?].” And to me, “[Seems?] like Betty don't never know when to come home. I do believe she would stay out till black dark if I didn't call her home.”